

## Preface

Comme si la fatigue devait nous proposer la forme de vérité par excellence, celle que nous avons poursuivie sans relâche toute notre vie, mais que nous manquons nécessairement, le jour où elle s'offre, précisément parce que nous sommes trop fatigués.

—Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*<sup>1</sup>

It may do good to others though not by effort or may simply be a good end in itself (or combining these, may only be able to do good by concentrating on itself as an end); a preparatory evasion of the central issue about egotism.

—William Empson (on Shakespeare's summer flower, which "is to the summer sweet, / Though to itself, it only live and die")

I have been in the habit of describing this book as a study of novels and poems in which "nothing happens," but it might be more accurate to say, reprising Auden's words about poetry, that they "make nothing happen" since the phrase allows us to hear the full range of ambiguities in the idea of "nothing" as an event made or allowed to happen. The works in question—Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), and poems of uncoun­ted experience by William Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, and Thomas Hardy—all articulate attitudes that define themselves against the many figures we have for action, whether this is understood in the dramatic sense of public performance, in the moral sense of intervention, or in the economic sense of materialization and productivity: Mme de Lafayette's heroine withdraws from the court, leaving her passion unconsummated; Austen's Fanny Price "cannot act"; the terse, elliptical poems of Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy elide the time of action. By their passivity and inconsequence, the subjects of these works might appear to be bound to a self-punishing eth-

1. "As if weariness were to hold up to us the preeminent form of truth, the one we have pursued without pause all our lives, but that we necessarily miss on the day it offers itself, precisely because we are too weary" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, xiii).

ics of chastity, renunciation, and waste. Yet rather than read these novels and poems as narratives of denial and denials of narrative, I argue that they make an open secret of fulfilled experience, where the term *open secret* refers to nonemphatic revelation—revelation without insistence and without rhetorical underscoring. Exemplifying a mode of recessive action that takes itself away as it occurs, the novels and poems in question locate fulfillment not in narrative fruition but in grace, understood both as a simplicity or slightness of formal means and as a freedom from work, including both the work of self-concealment and self-presentation. The protagonists of these texts do not withhold themselves from the public scene: they present the difference they make as an open secret, a gift that does not demand response but is there for the having, as readily taken up as it is set aside.

Put in polemical terms, this book contests the normative bias in favor of the demonstrable, dramatic development and realization of human powers characteristic of, but not limited to, the capitalist investment in value and work and the Enlightenment allegiance to rationalism and unbounded progress. This continued faith in the unambiguous good of articulation and expression appears in everyday speech in the difficulty of using terms such as *frankness*, *directness*, *transparency*, or *self-expression* without normative effect or without presuming a desire for such qualities; perhaps more unexpectedly, this same confidence in the value of exposure undergirds the hermeneutics of suspicion informing many of our most prized methods of literary criticism and cultural theory, where the quest for the “new” or materially different takes the form either of the recuperation and recovery of something previously overlooked, neglected, undervalued, or, on the contrary, of the demystification and exposure of the secret ideological workings of power. Neither of these critical models, I argue below, is prepared to accept something that does not require either the work of disclosure or the effort of recovery: the reception of the self-quieting, recessive speech acts and hardly emitted announcements or reports on self of the heroines of the psychological novel and the speakers of the Romantic and post-Romantic lyric of missed or declined experience.<sup>2</sup>

2. In accordance with standard critical practice, even if at the risk of thereby reinforcing a false distinction between positively demarcated empirical history and free-floating theory, I will capitalize the words *Romantic* and *Romanticism* when referring to the literary movements of the historical period bound, in the

Yet I should clarify from the outset that this book is not simply a defense of “romantic” over rational or instrumental ways of accounting, nor is it a celebration of the quiet reception of deep internal meanings over against the Enlightenment’s prizing of visibly measurable and productive difference. Instead, by tracing an ethos of nonappropriative contentment in a group of well-known but “minor” (minimally expressive) texts both at the center (Wordsworth’s “Lucy poems”) and at the far edges of the Romantic canon (Lafayette, Dickinson, Hardy), the book seeks to identify an alternative to the aesthetics of sublimity—of the inexpressible and nonrepresentable—characteristic of romantic investments in the heroic work of imagination—and to retrieve the “noninstrumental” from the concept of infinite, never-to-be-satisfied ethical responsibility found in the romantic sublime’s postmodern heirs. It is true that one way to make sense of my seemingly odd assortment of primary texts—together unclassifiable according to a single literary period or genre—would be to read them under the rubric of apologia for the contemplative life and, more particularly, as exercises in that freedom from instrumentality that for many post-Enlightenment and Romantic writers makes of aesthetic experience what Geoffrey Hartman once called “the ‘green belt’ of an increasingly industrialized, action-oriented, and deprivatized world.”<sup>3</sup> To be sure, critiques of what Shelley called the “unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty,” or of the avidity for “getting and spending” against which the speaker of another Wordsworth poem defends his “wise passiveness,” by no means begin with the Romantic response to Western capitalism’s scientific and industrial revolutions; there is a long and varied tradition within religious and nonreligious moral discourses of censuring and curbing the human animal’s supposedly “natural” cupidity and impatience for demonstrable yields. The specificity of postsecular, “Romantic” attempts to rescue imaginative play from the hold of instrumental reason—as distinct from earlier stoic, Christian or monastic apologies for the contemplative life—would seem to lie, first, in the critique not of some supposedly innate, “instinctual,” or “animal” appetite, but of reason’s own arrogance—of whatever might be excessive or unstopplable in the mind’s

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British context at least, by the French Revolution on one end and the ascent of Queen Victoria on the other, and I will use the lowercase everywhere else to refer to the polyvalent concept and adjective.

3. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, 186.

own will to seize—and, second, in the new role assigned aesthetic experience in freeing desire from the demands of goal-oriented action and forming it to laws of its own. Yet precisely here, I will want to distinguish (or at least keep open the relation between) the ethos of minimal realization adumbrated in my textual examples by figures whose passivity with respect to what it is in their power to do and ask for flies in the face of Enlightenment rationalism, and what might seem to be this ethos's closest ally: the turn, in Romanticism and elsewhere, toward aesthetic experience as a respite from the rushed action of a modernity so bent on bringing about the future that it leaves no time for the taking—deferral or postponement—of time.<sup>4</sup> For, as has been amply demonstrated by critics of “aesthetic ideology” as divergent as Paul de Man, Jerome McGann, Terry Eagleton, and Marc Redfield, the aesthetic, at least in its Schillerian incarnation, does not simply provide a refuge from the blindly transformative, acquisitive drives of Western capitalist development; as the locus of autoformation or *bildung*—of that process whereby the organism, whether artwork or human protagonist, is said to develop as much according to its own internal logic as by arbitrary determination—the aesthetic is also the chief repository of fantasies of self- and world-transformation, realization, and adequation.<sup>5</sup> Because in the pages that follow I will sometimes

4. For Hartman the “aesthetic” names a different because backward-looking (slower? more melancholic? more patient?) relationship to the “inertial force of the past” than that allowed by “action”:

If the characteristic of action is to insist on a specific end, on change rather than interpretation, and to consume itself in achieving this end, it does not have to respect the inertial force of the past, or try to sublimate it. Though it may have to respect the past provisionally to gain its purpose, action ideologizes interpretation and keeps moving relentlessly toward an all-consuming point which is the new regime, the new order. The alliance philosophy can make with art, through what we have learned to call the “aesthetic,” is always characterized, therefore, by a structure of postponement; the doubting or delaying of closure, the insistence on remainders or of a return of the past, and—more problematically—on a concept of elation that embraces both the reality of history and freedom of mind. (Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, 186)

5. See, e.g., McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*; Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*; de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*; and Redfield, *Phantom Formations*. Redfield's book, in particular, demonstrates the centrality of the concept of aesthetic *bildung* as self- or autoformation to modernity's narratives of history as the self-

have recourse to the concept of aesthetic play as the most readily available category for thinking “uncounted experience,” it is important here to distinguish the aesthetic project of adequating desire and means (whether by circumscribing and calibrating the one or refining and expanding the other) from what I will be calling in a few Wordsworth, Dickinson, and Hardy poems and in the Lafayette or Austen sentence of narration “reticent assertion”: the report of a minimal contentment often indistinguishable from a readiness to go without (answer), something that, translated into a psychological ethos, might look like accommodation to a world that promises one no return. Such complaisance without hope, akin to the mildness of the disappointed lover who bears his disappointment no ill will, differs from the tranquillity of stoic self-sufficiency and the stoniness of silent protest, although it can easily pass for either. More importantly, however, it represents something more modest, wearier, and less redemptive than the aesthetic project of reconciling duty and inclination and regaining via art the immediacy of nature, a project most explicitly developed in Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education* but present whenever the artwork is described in terms of a free submission to formal necessity.<sup>6</sup>

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production of humanity and fulfillment of the “human”: “If aesthetics invents autonomy as the condition of the artwork, and disinterestedness as the condition of the perception of the artwork, it also defines art as the sign of the human, the human as the producer of itself, and history as the ongoing work of art that is humanity” (11). See also Schiller’s claim: “For [the pedagogic or the political artist] Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal toward which he strives” (Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 19).

6. While Schiller is the chief expounder of “aesthetic education (*bildung*)” as the means of forming man so that he would be “led by his very impulses to the kind of conduct which is bound to proceed from a moral character” (17), and of the hopes of restoring “by means of a higher Art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed” (43), the theme of reconciling necessity and freedom, duty and inclination, echoes throughout the Romantic tradition, often taking the less secular form of a reprisal of Isaiah’s apocalyptic vision of the wolf and lamb feeding together; see, for example, M. H. Abrams’s comments on “the apocalyptic marriage” in *Natural Supernaturalism* (37–46). As de Man has argued, this dream of conforming to the law of reason without sacrifice to nature usually hinges, in Schiller at least, on what is itself a rhetorical figure of reciprocity, whereby two opposed principles (“nature” and “reason,” or the “formal” and “expressive drives”) mutually concede power to one another. See de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 129–62.

Whereas aesthetic ideology often promises desire a reflective relationship with the world, even if only in the form of an echo or image of its unattainability, the strange mode of patient or benevolent abandonment I wish to describe gives up on precisely such fantasies of mutual fulfillment—of fulfillment as mutuality. “Weariness (*la fatigue*) is generous,” asserts one of the interlocutors in the prefatory dialogue to Blanchot’s *Entretien infini*, and it is an odd resignation that having given up on the world as a source of completion—as what would fill lack and make complete—now stays with it, whether from habit or fatigue.<sup>7</sup>

Two brief examples, neither of them exactly representative of such an attitude, may demonstrate some of the possible ratios of expectations to their concession/fulfillment (where fulfillment may have the feel of concession and vice versa) defining this—or rather these (since they are multiple and contradictory)—moods of “enoughness.” The first comes from Austen’s account, in the concluding chapter to *Mansfield Park*, of Edmund’s easy transfer of affection from Mary Crawford to Fanny:

Scarcely had he done regretting Mary Crawford, and observing to Fanny how impossible it was that he should ever meet with such another woman, before it began to strike him whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well—or a great deal better; whether Fanny herself were not growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles, and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been; and whether it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation *enough* for wedded love.<sup>8</sup>

Given that the preceding clauses refer to Edmund’s settling on Fanny as a compensation for the loss of Mary, a careless reader might easily take the word *enough* as epitomizing the psychology of curtailment to which both Edmund and realist novel submit, and might thereby mistake for this novel’s “foundation enough” the smooth functioning of the “reality principle”—that principle of accommodation whereby the subject, disappointed in his ideal, learns to tailor desire to the limits of the possible or, less cynically, take happiness where he finds it.<sup>9</sup> Yet the joke unperceived

7. Blanchot, *L’Entretien Infini*, xi.

8. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 319 (emphasis added).

9. The difficulty here lies in distinguishing the project of “re-forming” desire to make it compatible with available object choices—an essentially “aesthetic” project, whatever its guise as a tough-minded, disenchanted “return to reality”—from the less heroic “happen-stance” of taking one’s good where one finds it.

by Edmund, as he forms “a possible, an hopeful undertaking” to win a hand he already possesses, is that Fanny makes no sacrifice and no compromise (not even on the incest taboo): far from requiring persuasion to make do with less and settle, as he must, on a second object choice, she is getting all she wants and more: such love might as well walk on air. The sentence’s ironically weightless “thud,” as Edmund misses Fanny where he finds her, may cause you to clap your hands in glee at the fairytale ending and boldness of Fanny’s unnoticed coup suspending the law of exchange (Edmund will exert himself to naught and still believe in the success of his persuasive endeavor), even as Austen thereby robs you of the illusion of a marriage founded in mutual understanding. Delight at the surplus underwriting Edmund’s cautious “enough” by no means precludes, and indeed may well take the form of, dry-eyed despair at its inevitable missing.

My second example of an oddly satisfying reprieve or “letdown” from teleological expectations is a story Roland Barthes recounts at the end of his entry on “waiting” in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*:

Un mandarin était amoureux d’une courtisane. “Je serai à vous, dit-elle, lorsque vous aurez passé cent nuits à m’attendre assis sur un tabouret, dans mon jardin, sous ma fenêtre.” Mais, à la quatre-vingt-dix-neuvième nuit, le mandarin se leva, prit son tabouret sous son bras et s’en alla.<sup>10</sup>

[A mandarin was in love with a courtesan. “I will be yours,” she told him, “when you will have passed one hundred nights waiting for me, sitting on a stool, in my garden, under my window.” But at the ninety-ninth night, the mandarin got up, took his stool under his arm, and went away.]

Doubtless, psychology can readily solve such apparent inconsequence by interpreting it as a matter of self-imposed frustration and neurotic postponement: the mandarin is afraid of the moment of possession and will not stay to have reality puncture his ideal; he has fallen in love with waiting, and it now suffices him. Or the mandarin may be less of a lover than an athlete for whom only the test of endurance matters, not the promised fruit, and who departs having done what he came to do; or perhaps, on the contrary, he knows no other way to prove to the courtesan his unconditional love for her. Yet in all these rationalizations there is a hint of the nonpsychological satisfaction afforded by the anecdote itself, by its koan-like self-containment (refusal of narrative complexity, detail, or develop-

10. Barthes, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, 50. Except where indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

ment) and its briefly, unhesitatingly assertive *passé simple*. So direct and nonexplicative a completed action (“and went away”) has the effect not so much of redeeming the ninety-eight previous nights from the bargain that held them hostage—only the courtesan can do that—as of setting time to naught, as if, with one period reached, all narrative and erotic entanglements were to go “pouf.”

One waits, and waits, and then gives up—such a movement yields a temporal sequence set loose from the ordering energies of the quest for possession and freed from the pendulum of anticipation and (non)fulfillment. In this book I will be interested as much in the rhythm of so inconsequent a sequence as in its possible, often contradictory, value-laden affects—the betrayal of apostasy, disappointment, relief, surrender, irony, elation. I offer these preliminary examples not simply to underscore the worldliness of these modes of divestiture—modes that include, importantly, habits of taking, and of taking without seeming to, as in the case of *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny, who helps herself to more than she is credited for—and not simply to distinguish such appropriative minimalism from modernity's image of self-sacrifice as guilt-driven and dutybound, if not regressively religious. My more oblique hope is that these examples may clarify why, in framing this project, I have not availed myself more readily of the rubric “Romantic pastoral” (although I certainly invoke it in my individual chapter readings). To the extent that pastoral is the justifiably maligned genre in which you point to poor people *and* say how good they have it, then this book sits uncomfortably close, even if the poverty in question here is not of the material kind.<sup>11</sup> But with the category “Romantic pastoral”—a term whose affinity with the suspension promised by aesthetic experience is already suggested by Hartman's metaphor of the “green belt”—come tales of redemption: hopes, if not for the restoration of lost Edens, then for the continuation of modernity's revolutionary proj-

11. William Empson's idiosyncratic account of pastoral remains in this sense a fundamental source of inspiration and critical model for this project insofar as his “versions of pastoral” refuse the standard “Christian” idealization of poverty as somehow purer because emblematic of self-sacrifice and recognize instead the worldliness or ambition or assertiveness or whatever we wish to call what is not self-denying in the making of minimal claims. Thus the “good” of Shakespeare's “summer's flower”—“poor” in the sense of not owning itself, being given up to the summer—lies in its continued vulnerability, its openness to danger and moral staining from without. See Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 89–115.



ects on milder grounds.<sup>12</sup> As I suggest more fully in the next chapter with respect to postmodern reprisals of Pauline dispensation, among the many ironies vexing the question of Romanticism's relation to the French Revolution (and to everything that in modernity seeks definitively, if not violently, to break with the past for the sake of bettering humankind) is that the attenuation of revolutionary violence—the turn toward less “formal,” less “spectacular,” less “dramatic,” less “overt” modes of effecting change with which Romanticism is often associated—goes hand in hand with a radicalization of its ends: dreams of total expression, infinite perfectibility, and interminable progress accompany the slowing down of modernity's imagined break with the past. Thus quite apart from the by now familiar and often too narrowly construed debates about whether Romantic apostasy constitutes a falling away from, or more gradual realization of, the quest for, in Abrams's words, “the renovation of the world and of man,” one of Romantic pastoral's more ambiguous and enduring legacies is the hypercathexis of figures of the ordinary, common and indistinct, making even the lightest of “letdowns” readable as a redemptive dream of “coming down to earth,” and charging all deflationary or “leveling” rhythms with democratizing, universalizing ends.<sup>13</sup> Because it can endow the most modest, circumscribed, and contingently determined assent with the power to ratify, legitimate, or save an unjust world, this—the Romantic habit of crediting with universal import precisely those modes of speech that refuse a public stance—poses perhaps as great a rhetorical challenge to a book of this kind as the irony of publishing a book about reticence, or that which resists, or rather does not require, foregrounding. I can of-

12. Thus, according to Lore Metzger, “pastoral most frequently functions in English Romantic poetry to articulate radical ends of social reform attenuated by an insistence on conservative means” (*One Foot in Eden*, xiv). M. H. Abrams's essay “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age” presents probably the most succinct version of the account of “Romanticism” (for which read “Wordsworth”) as a downward turn from the Miltonic/revolutionary epic level of “overt action and adventure” to “the more-than-heroic grandeur of the humble, the contemned, the ordinary, and the trivial” (118), a turn that Abrams explicitly links to New Testament pastoral themes of the divinity found among the poor and humble.

13. Abrams, “English Romanticism,” 118. For an alternative account of Romantic disappointment, as a deflation that is not recuperated as a “sublime” fall into depth, see Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment*.

fer no solution except to acknowledge the challenge and to remind readers of a number of alternative genealogies for “appropriative minimalism” in traditions less saturated with globalizing political ambitions and less marked by pretensions to universal exemplarity: from the defense of dissimulation (defined as passively letting oneself be taken for what one isn’t) as an *occasionally* appropriate tactic found in late Renaissance manuals on courtly manners; to the Jesuit allowance for mental reservation or silent disclaiming; to the kind of “minor ownership” (*menue propriété*)—attachment to minor things that “signals retreat,” “doesn’t show” (*qui ne se voit pas*) and “doesn’t concern others”—that Barthes links in *Le neutre* to the Taoist search for “a right [or balanced] relation (*“rapport juste”*) to the present, attentive and not arrogant” (118, 186); or again, to Blanchot’s idea of a benevolent or generous relenting that would have no higher source than tiredness.<sup>14</sup> The minimalism of such practices consists in part in their willful circumscription; their refusal, to the extent possible, of a dogmatic posture; and their nontransmissibility as moral examples.

14. For better or worse (as I might sooner have been relieved of the need to do anything but point and cite), it is only in the final stages of revising this book that I became fully acquainted with Barthes’ 1977–78 seminar “*Le neutre*” (or, as he would have had it “*Le désir de neutre*”), published both in audio and digested-note form in 2002. Among the many points of connection is Barthes’ tracing across a number of different figures—“benevolence,” “tact” (“*la délicatesse*”), “sleep,” “retreat”—of an odd sort of sociability on the part of those who do not particularly seek out the company of others, or who have no strong inclination toward extroversion, a quality he invokes at one point by quoting one of Suzuki’s definitions of the Zen term *sabi* as a “familiarity singularly tinged with aloofness,” which in the French reads “*familiarité étrangeté mitigée de désintéressement*” (*Le neutre*, 65)—a familiarity strangely mitigated by disinterestedness. Such easygoing disinterest presents the inverted form, as it were, to the quiet laying claim to a few possessions that Barthes wants to distinguish from the more typical arrogant “will-to-grasp.” Quick to acknowledge the class-constructedness of this “attachment to minor belongings” as a “*petit-bourgeois* attitude,” he nevertheless prefers it to the false choice between pure appropriation and pure asceticism that too often causes Westerners to misinterpret the Zen monk’s restriction to a bowl and robe as mere deprivation rather than as the right to a few possessions (*Le neutre*, 186, 194).